



The first weeks of the First World War in August and September 1914 gave a deceptive impression that the campaign was to be a war of movement. For both the Germans and the French, the initial deployments and timetables were based upon the notion of a vast, swift and decisive offensive. In Germany the troop trains and the huge columns of marching men moved according to the dictates of the Schlieffen Plan, by which the French were to be encircled and crushed by German armies moving through Belgium. For the French, the crucial action of the war was to be a massive offensive all along the frontier with Germany – Plan XVII – though ‘Plan’ is a rather grandiose word for what was little more than a blind faith in the offensive capabilities of the French soldiers. J.F.C. Fuller has described the tactical doctrines of the French General Staff of this time as ‘a school of thought rivalled only by the Dervishes of the Sudan’.

The French offensive was an unmitigated disaster. The French generals had underestimated both the number of German divisions available and the devastating firepower that each one possessed. The French infantrymen were mown down in their thousands and any hope of a Christmas vacation in Berlin had to be swiftly abandoned. Nor were German expectations of an early victory march through Paris much nearer the mark. Though the Schlieffen Plan was based upon somewhat more realistic premises, it too began to fall sadly behind schedule. Due partly to the strength of French firepower, and partly to a series of German blunders, the German push ground to a halt. The decisive act was the Battle of the Marne, from 5 to 12 September, after which the whole of the German line began to fall back.

But at least during this period, and during the so-called ‘Race to the Sea’, lasting until mid-October as each side desperately tried to outflank the others’ lines, the war had retained some degree of mobility. The continual marches, the movement of reserves from one sector to another, the clash of





The opening moves: German infantry advancing across open country to attack the French positions in the Lorraine.

skirmishers and cavalry screens, the headlong infantry assaults, all these composed the kind of warfare which each side had envisioned. In the first weeks it seemed possible to believe that war could still be fought according to the precepts of Frederick the Great, Napoleon or von Moltke. Yet by the end of October 1914 the whole battle line in Belgium and France had congealed. The futility of head-on infantry assaults in the face of modern rifles, machine guns and artillery was made apparent. Both sides were forced to dig deep holes in the ground and concentrate upon breaking up any attacks launched by their adversaries.

Stalemate: British soldiers still dug in three years later at Zillebecke.





The armies remained in these holes for the next four years, millions of men trapped in a desolate strip of territory, living and dying in a wilderness of trenches, dugouts, craters, shattered villages and forests of lifeless tree-stumps, a desert in the midst of civilisation, that became more featureless with each passing day. This book is concerned with the way men lived in this physical and spiritual desert. It will show how even in the midst of previously inconceivable conditions, men were able to formulate routines, rules and codes of conduct that could create some kind of order, some kind of meaning in the midst of Chaos itself. For all were agreed that they lived on the very threshold of Hell.

A French infantry lieutenant, Alfred Joubaire, wrote in his diary shortly before he was killed: 'Humanity is mad! It must be mad to do what it is doing. What a massacre! What scenes of horror and carnage! I cannot find words to translate my impressions. Hell cannot be so terrible. Men are mad!' Yet most men lived through the experience and remained more or less sane. Perhaps by examining the nature of that experience, at its most mundane, day-to-day level, it may be possible to discover just how the troops in the trenches managed to discern a necessary and logical reality that enabled them to survive and fight on.

A foretaste of the trenches:  
German infantry dig rifle  
pits, 1914.





The beginning of trench warfare proper is usually given as September 1914, when the German VII Reserve Corps turned around on the Chemin des Dames Ridge and blocked the advance of the British I Corps. Within a few weeks the stalemate that occurred there had spread down the whole battle-line. This line spread from the North Sea to the Swiss Frontier. Obviously, on such a long line, 475 miles in all, the nature of the terrain varied considerably, and this in turn had its effect upon the type of trenches and fortifications that were built. The northern part of the front, in Belgium and in France as far south as the Somme, was held by the British. Here was to be found some of the worst terrain of all and conditions in the British trenches were often nightmarish.

The line began at Nieuport on the coast and then ran along the flooded Yser to Dixmude. From there it ran around the notorious Ypres Salient and across the French frontier north-west of Armentières. This Flanders countryside was very flat and rarely more than a metre or two above sea level. The nearest English equivalent would be the fenlands of Cambridgeshire and Lincolnshire. In such conditions the most trivial little bump in the ground, never more than sixty metres above sea level, became an important strategic point. Unfortunately most of them were held by the Germans. Having been the first to decide to stand fast and dig they had always been able to choose the most advantageous spots. Two of the most important were Hill 60, two miles south-west of Ypres, and the Wytschaete-Messines Ridge, a little to the south.

Not only did possession of the higher ground give the Germans a tactical advantage, but it also forced the British to live in the foulest conditions. As soon as they began to dig down they would invariably find water two or three feet below



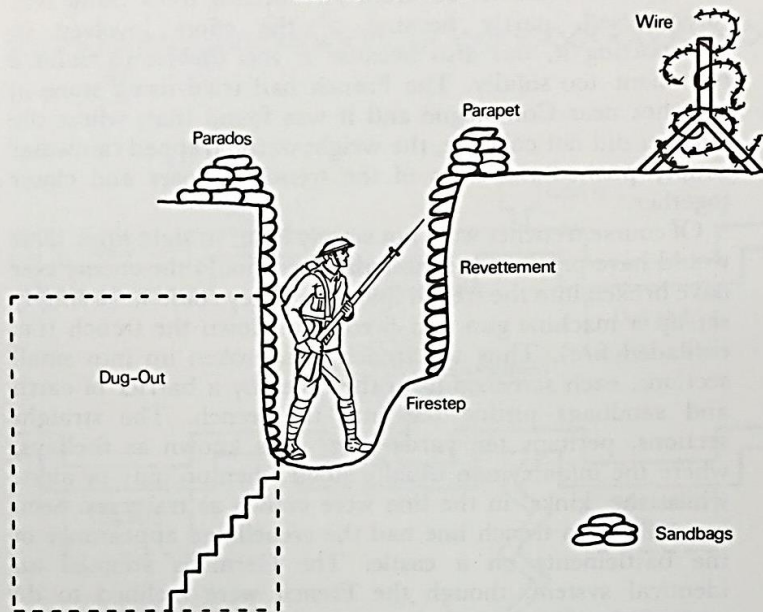
the surface. Along the whole line, from the coast to La Bassée, trench life involved a never-ending struggle against water and mud. Around Nieuport the terrain was little more than one big flood, the tide only being controlled by a complex series of locks, dams and canals. Trenches proper were quite out of the question and the British front was a series of sandbag breastworks and fortified islands. The Germans did their best to make life even more intolerable by continually shelling the locks and trying to flood out the defenders. In the rest of Flanders the British were soon forced to give up the unequal struggle against the mud and the constantly collapsing trenches. From January 1915 they took to constructing what were called parapet or command trenches. The Germans referred to them as box trenches. In these one only dug down, if at all, to a maximum of one or two feet and the rest of the trench was built up with thick walls of sandbags. These latter were rarely filled with sand; earth or, best of all, clay was generally used. Such trenches were usually between seven and eight feet deep and six to seven feet wide. The walls of sandbags themselves were made as thick as possible to absorb any bullets or shell fragments. Often they measured as much as ten feet at the top and twenty feet at the base. In certain parts of the line the ground was too swampy to permit even the creation of secure command trenches. In the La Bassée sector, which lay below sea level, a system of ferro-concrete emplacements had to be built. The 42nd East Lancashire Division on one Brigade front of about 2,000 yards used 5,036 bags of cement, 19,384 bags of shingle and 9,692 bags of sand in creating a single reserve trench line. Even excluding the necessary water, this involves over 900 tons of materials, most of which had to be manhandled by those members of the Division not actually in the fire trenches.

There was one other sector of the line in which command trenches were standard practice. This was in the Argonne, held by the French, where again it was found that the water level was much too near the surface. In all other areas the troops simply dug themselves a deep hole in the ground. But whether trenches were dug or built, they were all – French, German or British – designed according to the same basic pattern. In the fenland of Flanders, the slagheaps of industrial Artois, the chalky downlands of Picardy, the marshy lowlands of the Somme Valley, along the line of the Aisne, through Champagne, the Argonne, Lorraine and across the mountainous Vosges, each side created for themselves fairly uniform defence systems, and learnt a vocabulary that owed more to Vauban than to the theories of contemporary military science.

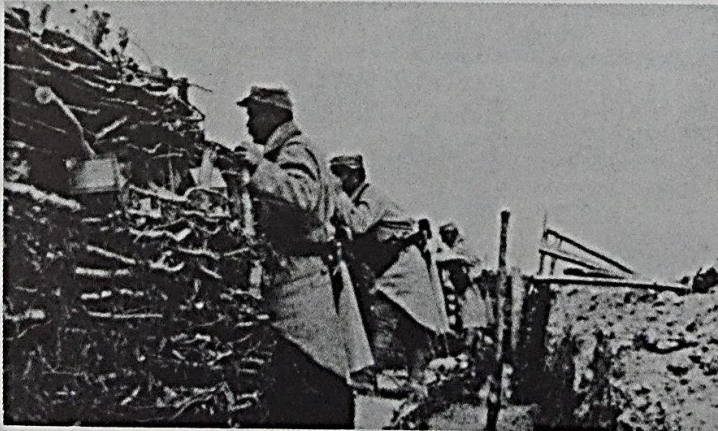
The front of the trench was known as the parapet, generally about ten feet high. Even in trenches which were dug down, the top two or three feet of the parapet would consist of a thick



# SIDE-VIEW OF TRENCH



line of sandbags. Obviously, in a trench of this depth it would be impossible to see or fire over the top, so there was built at the bottom a two or three-foot high ledge known as the fire-step. This was used by those on sentry duty, or by the whole unit when 'standing to' to face a possible enemy attack. The back wall of the trench was known as the parados, and it too was often built up with sandbags. Except in a particularly favourable terrain, notably chalk, it was not possible to expect the sides of a trench to stand up of their own accord. Rainfall, natural pressures and shell-fire would inevitably cause extensive subsidences. To minimise the chance of such disasters it was usual to revet the parapet and parados. The British and Germans generally used sandbags and timber, whilst the French were more inclined to use hurdles, bunches



French troops standing to on the fire-step of their trench. Note the typically French wattle revettements.



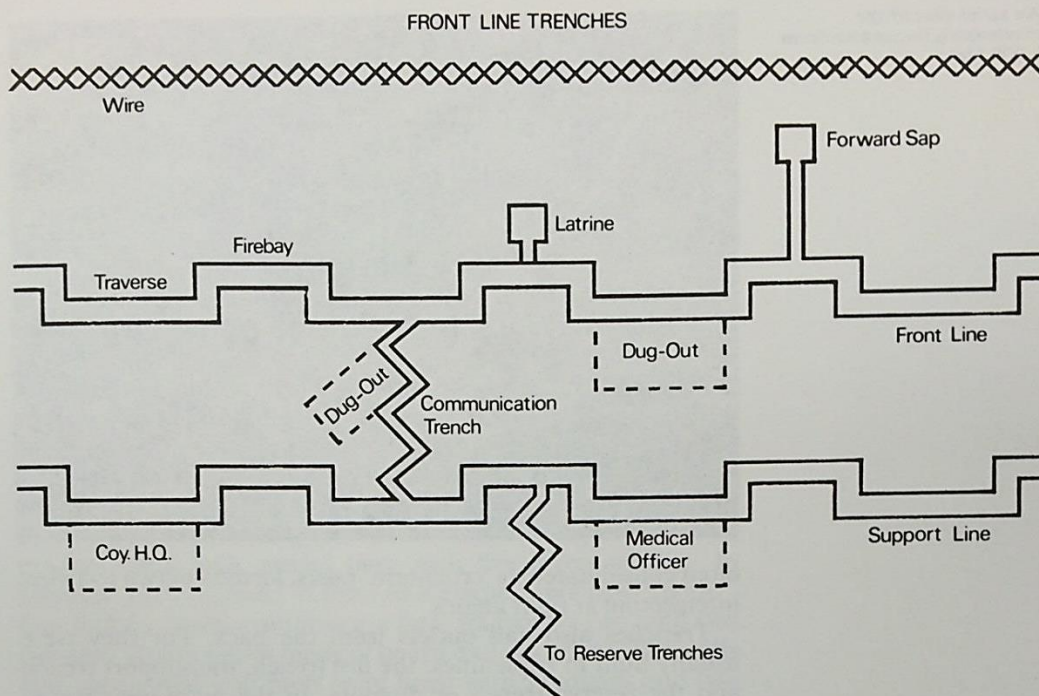
of twigs and branches cut from surrounding trees. Stone was rarely used, partly because of the effort involved in transporting it, but also because it was unwise to build a revetment too solidly. The French had tried using stone in trenches near Compiègne and it was found that, whilst the parapet did not collapse, the weight of the trapped rainwater simply pushed the sides of the trenches closer and closer together.

Of course trenches were not simply long, straight lines. This would have presented terrible dangers should the enemy ever have broken into the trench line. Then they could have simply set up a machine gun and fired right down the trench (i.e. enfiladed fire). Thus the trench was broken up into small sections, each screened from the other by a barrier of earth and sandbags jutting out into the trench. The straight sections, perhaps ten yards long, were known as firebays, where the infantryman usually stood when on duty or alert, whilst the 'kinks' in the line were known as traverses. Seen from the air a trench line had the crenellated appearance of the battlements on a castle. The Germans adopted an identical system, though the French were inclined to do without the laborious chain or bays and traverses, preferring instead a simple zig-zag line. One British officer described his misgivings on moving into a trench previously occupied by a French unit:

An almost too perfect example of a sand-bagged trench showing the traverses and firebays.







While the parapet was non-existent, an enormous mound of earth . . . the parados, rose behind our heads. Then, instead of being traversed by great bulkheads of sandbags, there was no protection at all at the sides of the bays. An occasional fascine stood, like a stone vase in some noble parterre, to give decoration to a dull alley.

The front-line trench was not, in fact, the most forward defensive position. Running out at right-angles to most trenches were what were known as saps, narrow passages some twenty or thirty yards long leading to an isolated little position for two or three men. These were the listening posts where for a couple of hours at a time the sentries would squat, peering into the darkness and straining to hear the slightest sound from the enemy lines. A French soldier spoke of 'the little listening posts of terrible memory. It is difficult to imagine the suffering of the sentries. . . How often did the absolute solitude provoke panic at the slightest movement of an animal in the grass, at the stirring of a branch in the moonlight?' These listening posts were often in shell craters. In 1916 and 1917, particularly, a shell falling in no man's land would precipitate a series of minor but bloody attacks and counter-attacks as each side tried to seize the new crater and connect it to their own lines with a new sap. For some time it was a General Order that any British unit had to occupy any shell crater created within sixty yards of their line. These were



An aerial view of the Hindenburg line as seen from 8,000 feet.



often consolidated as 'cruciform' posts, formed of two trenches intersecting at right angles.

Trenches also had outlets from the back. For they were usually built in triple lines: the fire trench, the support trench and the reserve trench or dugouts. In the more complicated German systems there might be as many as ten lines of trenches. To allow soldiers to move to the front or rear in comparatively safety communication trenches were built between the various lines. They were usually the same depth and width as ordinary fire trenches but did not have traverses and firebays. But these too were never constructed in a straight line, and went out in a zig-zag. On the British front by 1917 some of these communication trenches were as much as three miles long.

Another indispensable feature of any piece of trench was the dugout, a shelter or burrow to give some sort of protection against the elements and enemy artillery. Officers could almost always expect to find a corner in some kind of dugout, but the ordinary soldiers, in many cases, had to make do with even cruder refuges. Sometimes they simply spread pieces of wood, corrugated iron or tarpaulin across the trench from parapet to parapet. In other cases they would scoop out a hollow in the front or back of the trench. Here, wrapped in their groundsheet, they would snatch their brief periods of sleep, curled up parallel to the trench or with their feet sticking out into it. This system of personal 'funk-holes' was particularly common among the French. In the German and English lines, in theory at least, it was banned because of the increased danger of the trench walls subsiding. Nevertheless, any unit marching along a trench at night would provoke a monotonous series of muffled oaths as they stumbled over the legs of sleeping soldiers.



It is generally agreed that the Germans were much better off than the Allies with respect to their dugouts. In the front line there was little difference. One German officer has described the forward trenches in Champagne where the available shelter was nothing more than recesses dug in the chalk walls and covered with boards and a few shovelfuls of soil. Their inherent dampness caused the infantrymen to refer to them as 'drip wells' or 'men's baths'. But further back the accommodation was, under the circumstances, almost lavish. Such was the case in the Somme Valley in 1916. Here the dugouts were thirty or forty feet deep, connected by tunnels and steel railway systems. Electric light and ventilation was provided in all rooms, and many of them had panelled walls and planked floors. An English chaplain who visited some captured German trenches during the Battle of the Somme described the extreme lengths to which the Germans went to make these dugouts habitable. The walls were boarded with neatly morticed timbers, telephone wires were laid along the walls, iron girders were boxed in, ceilings were painted white, woodwork varnished, and in the officers' quarters one even found wooden beading, carpets on the floors and glass windows. The Reverend was probably mistaken about the windows. Another eye-witness pointed out that the German dugouts captured near Le Sars contained 'port holes' of mirrored glass to give the illusion of being able to look out.

British officer  
German dugout  
wall paper and  
panelling.





Wire, of course, was a ubiquitous feature of no man's land. One of the most common fatigues for the men in the trenches was the wiring party. Almost every night a little group would have to crawl over their own parapets and repair an old entanglement or add even more. At first the wire was supported with stakes knocked in with padded mallets, but



later someone came up with the idea of giving the stakes a corkscrew tip so that they could be noiselessly inserted into the ground. For obvious reasons the wire was always placed at least a grenade's throw from one's own trench. The amount used varied a great deal, depending largely on the zeal and industriousness of the unit in the line. The Germans were particularly keen in this respect. Their wire was hardly ever less than fifty feet deep, and in many places it was a hundred feet more. In the Siegfried Line every trench had at least ten belts of wire in front of it. The French, too, relied heavily on this kind of obstruction. In the Fourth Army trenches near Rheims in April 1916 it was an Army Order that each unit had to add at least two yards to the thickness of the wire every week.

Barbed wire entanglements.



features, however, were standard. The most important of these was that at all times some proportion of the men would be on sentry duty. The task was usually split into two or three-hour cycles. After a spell of sentry duty a man would take the same amount of sleep and then be available for a further two to three hours fatigues. At night the number of sentries was usually doubled, leaving even less time for sleep. Sheer exhaustion, in fact, was one of the greatest problems at the front. Sentries were often given beats to patrol, up and down the trench, and it was not uncommon to find a man who had fallen asleep on his feet and had wandered hundreds of yards away from his own unit. A private in the 5th Duke of Wellington's West Riding Regiment was of the opinion that 'the only thing that gets on one's nerves here is the sentry-go at night; we have really too much'. C.E. Montague wrote: 'For most of his time the average private was tired. Fairly often he was so tired as no man at home ever is in the common run of his work ... sometimes to the point of torment, sometimes much less, but always more or less tired.' In some units the sentries did not have a beat, but remained in one spot, peering through a steel loophole, a periscope, or simply staring over the parapet. Robert Graves explained:

At night our sentries had orders to stand with their head and shoulders above the parapet...It implied greater vigilance and self-confidence in the sentry, and also put the top of his head above the level of the parapet. Enemy machine guns were trained on this level, and it would be safer to get hit in the chest or shoulders than in the forehead.



another by as much as 100 yards.

But what of that narrow strip that divided two opposing trench lines – ‘no man’s land’? The very negativeness of the concept is testimony to the tactical and strategic bankruptcy that was revealed on the Western Front, whilst it also hints at the utter desolation, at the uselessness of this pulverised, barren vacuum. The width of no man’s land varied a great deal from sector to sector. It was usually between ten and five hundred yards, the average distance between the trenches being two to three hundred yards. In Flanders, the average was a little less, probably about 150 yards. But, it is very difficult to generalise. Around Cambrai, one of the easiest British sectors, there was a dead zone of 500 yards; whilst at Les Boeufs, near Guillemont, it was only fifty yards. Sometimes the two sides were almost nose to nose. Near Zonnebeke in 1915 the British and Germans were only seven or eight yards apart, and in certain trenches in La Boisselle it has been claimed that the opposing sentries could have crossed their bayonets. In the Ypres Salient, the worst part of the British lines, the trenches were always very close. At one point the Canadians found themselves at one end of a ruined barn and the Germans at the other. On the Bellewaarde Ridge, in 1915, the British and the Germans actually shared the same front-line trench. All that divided them was a thick barrier of sandbags and barbed wire.



The men would move up to the front line at night, because of the threat of hostile artillery. Most of the journey would be through the communication trenches, each platoon being separated by intervals of a hundred yards, again in deference to the enemy artillery. This journey in itself could be an exhausting experience. There was no light and each man could only stumble along after the person in front of him, often through inches of mud or water. A.P. Herbert remembered such a trip up to the front line:

When at last we came into the deep communication trench we felt that the end of [our] weariness must surely be near. But the worst exasperations of relieving an unknown line were still before us. It was a two-mile trudge in the narrow ditches to the front line. No war correspondent has ever described such a march; it is not included in the official 'horrors of war'; but this is the kind of thing, more than battle or blood which harasses the spirit of the infantryman and composes his life... Each man [becomes] a mere lifeless automaton ... Mechanically each man grapples with the obstacles, mechanically repeats the ceaseless messages that are passed up and down ... to those behind, and stumbles on. He is only conscious of the dead weight of his load, and the braces of his pack biting into his shoulders, of his thirst and the sweat of his body, and the longing to lie down and sleep. When we halt men fall into a doze as they stand and curse pitifully when they are urged on from behind.



The rain could come down at almost any time. Between 25 October 1914 and 10 March of the following year there were only eighteen dry days, and on eleven of these the temperature was below freezing. In March 1916, the rainfall was the heaviest for thirty-five years. In 1917, around Ypres and Passchendaele, at the height of the Third Battle of Ypres, it began drizzling on the 30 July and continued, without pause, for the whole of August. In July 1916, an officer of the London Regiment wrote home: 'The mud is awful. Have had two days of torrential rain which has flooded everything.' Throughout the war battalion reports were full of comments about the effects of the rain, particularly the mud. Sometimes men had to 'lie flat and distribute their weight evenly in order to prevent sinking in the mire'. One officer was ordered to consolidate his advanced position and wrote back 'It is impossible to consolidate porridge.' Mark Plowman wrote of the trenches on the Somme in November 1916:

The mud makes it all but impassable, and now sunk in it up to the knees, I have the momentary terror of never being able to pull myself out. Such horror gives frenzied energy, and I tear my legs free and go on...Both sides are glued where they stand...Little or nothing is done for the simple reason that the deity has not yet constructed men able to make or repair trenches when the earth at every step holds them immobile.

In the same month one Guards battalion lost sixteen men through exhaustion and drowning in the mud. One had been trapped up to his neck in the stuff for forty-six hours, and though he was eventually rescued he died fifteen minutes later. On 12 December, Colonel Troyte-Bullock of the 7th Somerset Regiment, noted in his journal that 'the man who had sunk in up to his armpits had to be handed over as trench stores'.

The most horrible consequence of the mud was that men actually drowned in it. This sometimes happened in the trenches themselves, but more often when troops had been forced to climb out of an impassable communication trench and travel on top. The great danger then was of falling into a shell-hole and being slowly sucked down. A chaplain at the front told of a particularly horrible tale he was assured was true. A party of men from his division were going up to a sap head when, as they turned a corner in the trench, they stumbled across a man who had been blown into the mud. He was still alive, with only his head and the stump of a leg still visible. It proved impossible to get near enough to pull him out, and the party were forced to retrace their steps, leaving the wounded man to sink slowly. For the wounded, staggering back from an assault, even a shell-hole full of water could be a



death-trap. A survivor of the Third Battle of Ypres has described such an incident:

In the slough of the  
rescuing a comrade  
shell hole. Wounded  
often drowned in th

A khaki-clad leg, three heads in a row, the rest of the bodies submerged, giving one the idea that they had used their last ounce of strength to keep their heads above the rising water. In another miniature pond, a hand still gripping a rifle is all that is visible, while its next-door neighbour is occupied by a steel helmet and half a head, the staring eyes staring icily at the green slime which floats on the surface almost at their level.

It was not only the British in Flanders who suffered from the effects of the weather. As one Frenchman wrote: 'Mud, the *poilus* had all sorts of names for it. But these names all boiled down to the same thing. Mud, be it known as *la melasse*, *la gadoue*, *la gadouille*, *la mouscaille*.' Each of these words, just as simple sounds, gives a vivid impression of the cloying, glutinous consistency of the mud. Another Frenchman noted that

... the communication trenches are no more than cess-pools filled with a mixture of water and urine. The trench is nothing more than a strip of water. The sides cave in behind you, as you pass, with a soft slither. We ourselves are transformed into statues of clay, with mud even in one's very mouth.

Another wrote in his diary:

These days, a sea of mud. The badly wounded are drowned as they try to drag themselves to the aid post...The hardest trial is the mud...Dirty cartridges, rifles whose clogged up mechanisms won't work any more; the men pissed in them to make them fire.





There was little that could be done to alleviate the effects of the rain and the mud. The waterproof groundsheets served as some sort of protection, if used as a cape, and in late 1915 the British issued thigh-length gum-boots, to be used as trench stores; 2,500 pairs were allocated to each division. At about the same time, the Germans issued many pairs of waterproof overalls for the use of the men in the front-line trenches. The only other expedients were sumps, deep holes dug in the trench to drain off excess water, but these were only effective for very light rain and soon became clogged up. Miles and miles of duckboards were also laid along the floor of the trenches, but they often floated away or were trodden down into the mud. Also, because they were separate strips, laid end to end, walking along a pitch-black trench could be a hazardous exercise. If a man stepped on the very end of the board it tended to shoot up in the air and clout him on the nose or the back of the head.

Ironically, one of the men's most valuable protections, the great-coat, could prove a dreadful liability in wet weather. The coats weighed approximately 7 lbs. After a couple of days rain, however, they were capable of absorbing an extra 20 lbs of water. According to the Official History (Medical) it was quite common for the combination of mud and water to amount to an extra 34 lbs, and one officer reported that when the great-coats of a platoon coming out of the Somme trenches were weighed, one of them was actually 58 lbs. Added to over 60 lbs of equipment, it is clear that not the least of the ordeals of trench warfare was simply moving from one point to another. Imagine yourself in the pitch dark, after two or three days of wet, cold, hunger, sleeplessness, staggering down a trench, knee-deep in mud, carrying various burdens that almost equal your own body-weight.

The wet conditions were responsible for another abiding curse, 'trench foot', caused by having stood for hours, even days on end without being able to remove wet socks or boots. Just one immersion in water, followed by a twenty-four hour period during which the boots were never taken off was enough to cause trench foot. The condition was very similar to frost-bite, and was at first confused with it. The French, in fact, used the term *pieds g  l  s* right through the war. The feet would gradually go numb, turn red or blue, and in extreme cases gangrene would set in. In this case, toes, or a whole foot, would have to be amputated.

Trench foot was recognised at an early stage in the war as a serious threat to a unit's effective strength. In 1914, there were only eight recorded cases; in 1915 the figure had reached 6,462. In March 1916, for example, after four days in the trenches at the Bluff, in Ypres, the 2nd Royal Scots had to exacuate 100 men, a quarter of their strength, who were suffering from exhaustion and trench foot. In the course of the



Another related problem was cold. A lieutenant of the 2nd Scottish Rifles wrote:

No one who was not there can fully appreciate the excruciating agonies and misery through which the men had to go in those days...Paddling about by day, sometimes with water above the knees; standing at night, hour after hour on sentry duty, while the drenched boots, puttees and breeches became stiff like cardboard with ice from the freezing cold air.

Life became a constant struggle to don enough clothes, and to stamp about and flail oneself with sufficient vigour to prevent the blood seemingly freezing in one's veins. The winter of 1916-17 was particularly savage. It lasted, implacably, from October to April, the severest since 1894-5. During January and February the conditions were positively Arctic. A sergeant of the 15th Australian battalion wrote:

No water was brought [into the trenches], but the ice in the shell-holes was melted to obtain water...I filled my water-bottle at Mametz at midday with boiling hot tea, and when I reached Bull's Trench at 5 pm it was frozen so hard that an ordinary knife made hardly any impression on it, and we broke it instead.

Nor was the following winter much better. Again the first two months of the year were notably severe, with alternating periods of extreme cold and sudden thaw, the ideal recipe for mud and the sudden collapse of whole trenches. Rain, snow and sleet alternated from day to day. At an artillery observation post near Boesinghe the occupants began their tour standing up to their waists in water. By morning each of them was surrounded by a thin layer of ice.

There were only two possible antidotes to the cold. One was to provide heating in the dugouts and the other to make special clothing available. Most trenches, in fact, did have some sort of brazier in the dugout, using either coke or dry chips as fuel. But one had to pay a price even for keeping warm. The rank atmosphere in a foggy dugout packed with dirty sweating men can well be imagined. There was rarely any chimney to extract the smoke and from time to time men died of asphyxiation whilst asleep. But if the braziers were kept outside the dugouts the problem then was to keep them alight. In November 1915, Hitchcock remembered seeing desperate German soldiers walking around on the parapets, swinging their braziers to and fro to keep the embers alive.

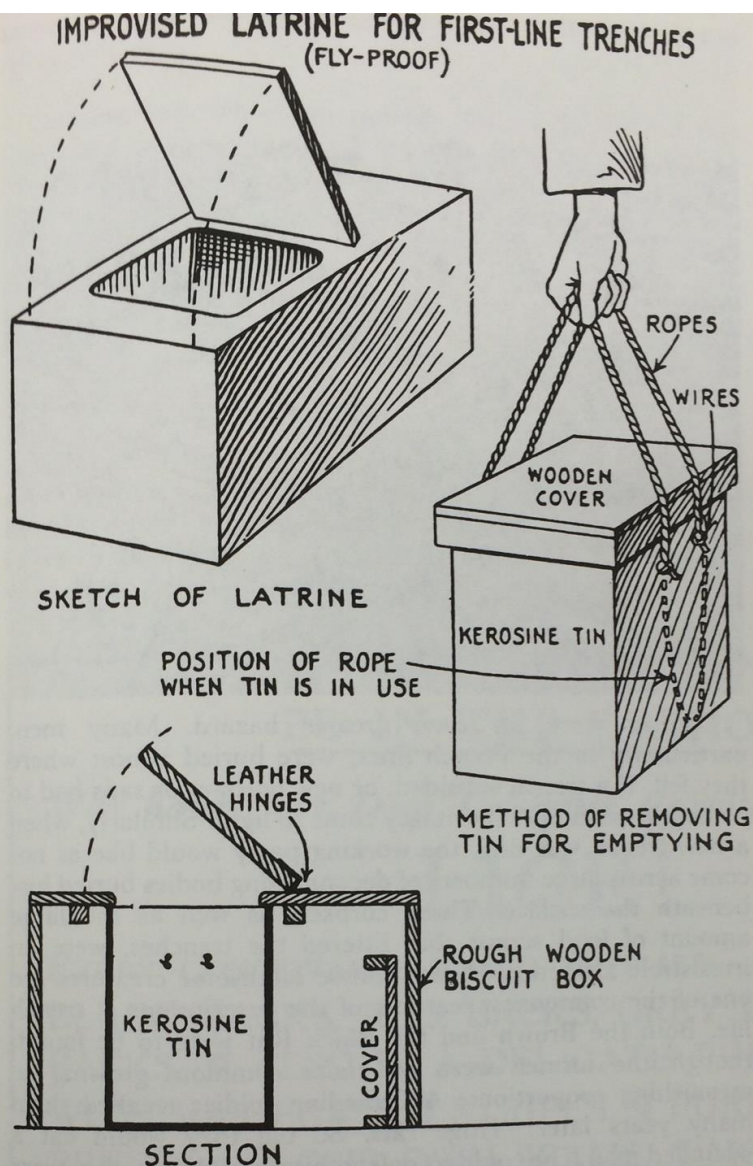


Some official provision was made for extra clothing. In late 1914, fur undercoats were issued, replaced a year later by sleeveless leather jerkins. The former were made of goatskin, the rare all-white ones being especially prized by those of a sartorial bent. Over this each man had his greatcoat and a mackintosh cape, the latter soon replaced by the combined waterproof cape/groundsheet. There was also an official issue of fingerless woollen gloves, whilst those who had to wear kilts in the trenches, a habit that was never abandoned, received a special issue of short woollen drawers. Beyond this the men had to make do with whatever cardigans, sweaters or mufflers they managed to get sent from home. The French were almost completely dependent on their own resourcefulness. Many stuffed newspapers in their jackets and down their trousers and wrapped thick bundles of rags around their feet. Several writers have commented on the bizarre appearance of French front-line troops in winter. C.M. Chenu described the terrible days of January 1915, when he saw 'an army of cowed phantoms, enveloped in blankets, strips of canvas, oil-cloth table covers'. Another wrote of men

...draped in canvas cloaks, like knights of old, wearing their helmet over their cap comforter and giving the appearance of some kind of ancient helm. Muffled up in strange woollens sent from home, their sheepskin capes made them look like the peasant soldiers of earlier days.

These various expedients were not without value. In the British Army, at least, the number of cases of pneumonia was, under the circumstances, remarkably low. The Medical History records only 7,827 cases, an average ratio of 1.52 per thousand men, although a high proportion of them, twelve per cent, proved fatal. What is even more extraordinary is that all sources agree that the common cold was almost unknown at the front. On the other hand, nephritis, which affects the kidneys and is generally attributable to excessive exposure to wet and cold, was a primary cause of non-battle casualties. 35,563 cases were admitted to hospitals in France, though only just over one per cent proved fatal.

Yet all the rain that fell on the Western Front was not enough to wash away the accumulated filth. The rubbish, urine, excreta, corpses in the trenches, as well as the unwashed state of the men, produced every type of pestilence and disease associated with such conditions. Sanitary facilities were crude at the best of times. Guy Chapman wrote of his spell at the front line on Tower Hamlets Ridge in 1917: 'We descended to primal man. No washing or shaving here, and the demands of nature answered as quickly as possible in the handiest and deepest shell-hole.' Officially, latrines in the trenches were to be pits four to five feet deep, placed in their



own sap. When filled within one foot of the top they were to be filled in and a new one dug. Sometimes provision was made for the use of metal buckets, again located in their own sap. When filled they were to be taken out somewhere between the front and support trenches and the contents dumped. Officially they were to be buried, but as often as not it was simply a case of hastily throwing the contents as far as possible. Or, as Chapman indicated, men would bypass the sanitary arrangements altogether and use a handy shell-hole. This must have at least earned the men the gratitude of the two sanitary personnel attached to each company. Usually referred to as the 'shit wallahs', one of their tasks was the disposal of urine and excreta.



The whole twenty-four hour cycle in the trenches revolved round 'stand-to', just before dawn and dusk, when everybody mounted the fire step in case the enemy should choose this propitious moment to attack. The rest of the twenty-four hours was divided into two to four watches, those on duty being told to be particularly vigilant at night. After the dawn stand-to there would normally be a tacit truce for an hour or so, as each side prepared and ate its breakfast. In the Royal Fusilier trenches, in early 1915, breakfast was eaten at 8 a.m., after which rifles were inspected, fatigue parties were assembled to repair the trenches, and other work was done. Lunch was at noon, followed by more fatigues. Then dinner was taken at 6 p.m., followed by the dusk stand-to for about an hour, after which fatigue parties worked all night. In the 1st Cameronians in 1915 the dawn stand-to was at 4.10 a.m. At just after 5 a.m. one sentry per platoon would be mounted and the rest of the men would have their rifles inspected before either grabbing a little sleep or being assigned to a fatigue party. At dusk, after the stand-to, all men would fall in for an

officer's inspection. One third of them would then go on sentry duty, another third be dispatched down the communication trench for rations and stores from the Quartermaster, whilst the remaining third would sleep, work, or go out on patrols. In short, there was never any time, day or night, when the majority of the men were not awake and active. Accounts agree, however, that, as some sort of concession to normal pre-war habits, the quietest time of the whole twenty-four hours was between 3.30 a.m. and 9 a.m.

Particularly wearying were the endless fatigues. The trenches nearly always required some sort of repair or modification: they were not deep enough, the mud and water had to be cleared out, a sap dug, a new latrine sunk, or perhaps part of the line had subsided. Rations and stores had to be carried up from the trenches further back, or wounded men had to be carried back to the medical officer's dugout. And almost every night some men would have to crawl into no man's land to repair a gap in the wire or lay even more. Fatigues were just as endless in the support and reserve positions, where stores had to be continually moved around and complete new trench lines dug or existing ones remodelled. In the latter half of the war all sides began to realise that the soldiers simply could not sustain this dual role







*War was return of earth to ugly earth,  
War was foundering of sublimities,  
Extinction of each happy art and faith  
By which the world had still kept head in air,  
Protesting logic or protesting love,  
Until the unendurable moment struck –  
The inward scream, the duty to run mad.*

Robert Graves

*In many acts and quiet observances  
You absorbed me:  
Until one day I stood eminent  
And I saw you gathered round me,  
Uplooking,  
And about you a radiance that seemed to beat  
With variant glow and to give  
Grace to our unity.*

*But, God! I know that I'll stand  
Someday in the loneliest wilderness,  
Someday my heart will cry  
For the soul that has been, but that now  
Is scatter'd with the winds,  
Deceased and devoid.*

*I know that I'll wander with a cry;  
'O beautiful men, O men I loved,  
O whither are you gone, my company?'*

Herbert Read



*No pen or drawing can convey this country – the normal setting of the battles taking place day and night, month after month. Evil and the incarnate fiend alone can be master of this war, and no glimmer of God's hand is seen anywhere. Sunset and sunrise are blasphemous, they are mockeries to man, only the black rain out of the bruised and swollen clouds all through the bitter black of night is fit atmosphere in such a land. The rain drives on, the stinking mud becomes evilly yellow, the shell-holes fill up with green-white water, the roads and tracks are covered in inches of slime, the black dying trees ooze and sweat and the shells never cease. They alone plunge overhead, tearing away the rotting tree stumps...annihilating maiming, maddening, they plunge into the grave which is this land; one huge grave, and cast upon it the poor dead. It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless.*

Paul Nash

*The world wasn't made in a day,  
And Eve didn't ride in a bus,  
But most of the world's in a sandbag,  
And the rest of it's plastered on us.*

Soldiers' doggerel

*And clink of shovels deepening the shallow trench.  
The place was rotten with dead; green clumsy legs  
High-booted, sprawled and grovelled along the saps  
And trunks, face downward, in the sucking mud,  
Wallowed like trodden sandbags loosely filled;  
And naked sodden buttocks, mats of hair,  
Bulged, clotted heads slept in the plastering slime.*

Siegfried Sassoon

